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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN LEADERSHIP CONTINUES OFFENSIVE

11. (SBU) The Russian leadership September 10 and 11 continued to justify Russia's actions in South Ossetia, while saying that Russia was not seeking a new Cold War. Putin told Western experts that Russia had no intention of invading any other former Soviet republics, and strongly refuted South Ossetia leader Kokoity's earlier assertion of future integration with North Ossetia within Russia. While saying Russia and the West had no ideological differences, Putin accused the U.S. of "pushing" Georgia into attacking South Ossetia by training and funding Georgia's armed forces and expressed anger at U.S. ships in the Black Sea. FM Lavrov told Polish TV that the Secretary had said that if Georgia used force, it would "squander its chances to join NATO." Lavrov also announced he would travel to the two regions shortly to discuss opening Russian embassies there, and said that Abkhazia and South Ossetia had left the Soviet Union "the same way Georgia had." Following Defense Minister Serdyukov's closed-door address to the Duma, in which there were reportedly strong criticisms of Russia's military capabilities, Medvedev announced that modernization of the armed forces had become a top priority. A poll showed 48 percent of respondents favored relations with the West, while those believing a new Cold War was unlikely (43 percent) just edged out those who thought it was possible (40 percent). The Georgian Embassy said it would withdraw all its diplomats from Moscow by the end of September. End summary.

Putin Seeks to Persuade Valdai

12. (SBU) Demonstrating Moscow's recent efforts to argue its case more forcefully to the international community, Putin met with the Valdai Club of Russian and Western foreign policy experts in Sochi September 11. Putin insisted Russia had no "imperial ambitions," and had no plans to invade another former Soviet Republic. He criticized the West's "propaganda machine," claiming its coverage had been biased. He said the U.S., instead of "seeking a solution to interethnic conflicts," had "pushed" the Georgian side into aggressive action by training the Georgian armed forces and sending "huge financial resources there." He said Russia did not want a new Cold War, but even if there was Cold-War like opposition with the West, Russia would still cooperate on issues such as terrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, and energy security. According to one participant, Putin had dismissed concerns about economic consequences for Russia, and had sought to convey a tough line in the face of domestic criticism of Russian policy, including over dipping into the stabilization fund, justifying (once again) Russian actions as the right thing to have done. Harvard University Professor Marshall Goldman, also a participant at the Valdai meeting, echoed those comments. He told us he was struck by Putin's self-confidence both in private and before the gathering of experts. During the three hours he spent with foreign experts, Putin was extremely critical of the west, and of the U.S. in particular. Goldman, who with the group of experts also spent three hours with President Medvedev September 12

in Moscow, contrasted Putin's bravado with Medvedev's caution, his desire to work with the West and his hope to be able to return to his domestic reform agenda.

Putin and Lavrov Shoot Down Kokoity on Reintegration

13. (SBU) Both Putin and Lavrov rapidly shot down South Ossetia leader Kokoity's comment that his region wanted to be absorbed by Russia and rejoin North Ossetia. Kokoity then said he had been "misunderstood;" South Ossetia did not want to give up its independence and become part of Russia. (Given Kokoity's unambiguous and repeated avowal to integrate into Russia, Russia's print media pounced on the reversal.)

MFA on the Offensive with International Community

14. (SBU) During his trip to Poland September 10-11, Lavrov used interviews with Polish TV and press to argue Russia's justification. In a clear effort to press Poland to proceed with "business as usual," he stressed the potential for increased cooperation and trade between Russia and Poland, while highlighting that Russia provided 97 percent of Poland's coal and 60 percent of its natural gas. He claimed Russia was not seeking to punish Poland for its support of Georgia. Ignoring 17 years of Russian support for Georgian territorial integrity, Lavrov maintained that Abkhazia and South Ossetia had left the Soviet Union the same way Georgia had; they had had referenda, established governments, parliaments, constitutions. He said if NATO supported Georgia, it meant that NATO was supporting the aggressor, and claimed the Secretary and U.S. officials had said that if Georgia used force, it would squander its chances to join NATO. Lavrov announced he would visit the two regions to discuss opening of Russian embassies. DFM Ryabkov also made the usual arguments in a wide-ranging interview, but stated that the Secretary said the U.S. would oppose Russian strategic interests.

Military Criticized; Armed Forces to be Modernized

15. (SBU) The Duma reportedly raised concerns about Russia's military readiness and equipment during a closed-door session with Defense Minister Serdyukov and approved an increase of 1.5 trillion rubles (USD 60 billion) for the military, which would make Russian defense spending approximately five percent of GSP. Following this, Medvedev declared that "Georgia's aggression" had demonstrated the need for Russia to make modernizing its armed forces a "top priority." Finance Minister Kudrin said that the government would review and support proposed increases in defense spending, but they would first need to be approved by the President.

Russians Don't Want New Cold War, but Don't Rule it Out

16. (SBU) An Interfax poll showed 48 percent of respondents strongly favored "mutually profitable relations" with the West, with 33 percent saying Russia should stop being dependent on the West. 43 percent of respondents believed a new Cold War was unlikely, just barely beating the 40 percent who said it was "more or less possible," and 13 percent not responding.

BEYRLE